



News from

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A REPORT FROM IRAQ

By Congressman Ron Kind

The land of the “not quite right” has turned into the land of the ever more dangerous and difficult. I returned to Iraq last week on a Congressional fact-finding mission after less than a year since my previous visit. The trip gave me an opportunity to hear from our troops in the field, meet with military commanders and visit with some Iraqi citizens.

Unquestionably, the mission in Iraq has become more dangerous and difficult. The insurgents have expanded their support. They are more sophisticated, coordinated and lethal in their tactics. They enjoy sanctuaries in some major cities and they are exploiting the lack of progress in rebuilding the Iraqi infrastructure to their advantage.

Our Troops are doing a terrific job under difficult and dangerous circumstances. We can all be proud of our men and women in the military who are following their orders, carrying out their missions and sacrificing so much to give the Iraqi people a chance for a more peaceful and prosperous future. But they seem tired and stretched very thin. I had lunch and dinner with many of our soldiers from Wisconsin during my trip. Nothing makes you more proud to be an American than the chance to see our soldiers performing their duties under trying conditions. They are all well-trained, well-motivated and represent the best America has to offer.

Fortunately, the conditions for most of our soldiers have improved from a year ago. The supplies have caught up to them. They have a good selection of food and beverages. Most have air-conditioned places in which to sleep. Communications back home have gotten much better and on-line education courses are offered to those interested in continuing their education.

But when they go out on patrol, they don't know who the enemy is, where the next ambush is going to come, and whether they are going to get back to camp in one piece. Many have to go out on patrols seven days a week. They return to get some sleep before they go out again the next day. They would gladly welcome a cold beer when they do finish their shift (alcohol is prohibited in Iraq) and they hate the “stop-loss” orders that prevent them from being rotated out of Iraq at the end of their tours.

Forty percent of our troops in Iraq are Guard and Reserve Units. They are there for one year once their boots hit the ground. With training and preparation before deployment, our Guard and Reserve are away from their families and jobs for up to 18 months. And many that have returned home are being put on notice for future activation and deployment. Clearly, such a sacrifice on so few for so long is unsustainable.

I was surprised by the lack of progress in rebuilding the Iraqi infrastructure to meet the basic needs of the people, such as: running water, electricity, garbage pick-up and a good workable sewer system. Of the \$19 billion appropriated to rebuild Iraq only \$1 billion has been spent so far. I spoke to one Iraqi woman and asked if she felt her neighbors are growing impatient. She chuckled and said “we’re tired of being patient. We’ve been patient for 35 years, we want results now.”

The Iraqis are a people who believe that if the U.S. can put a person on the moon, then we are capable of helping them so much more. They see our impressive military with all the technology rolling through their communities and they are wondering why we can’t get their water running on their electricity hooked up. And the insurgents are quick to pin the blame on us. But without security it will be difficult to make significant progress with reconstruction. It’s hard to walk into a neighborhood with a hammer in one hand and a gun in the other.

Nor are the Iraqi Security Forces trained and equipped sufficiently to assume more of the security responsibility themselves. Many of the Iraqi forces and their families are being targeted themselves by the insurgents and there are numerous instances of insurgents penetrating these forces for their own advantage. But helping the Iraqis to develop the capability to provide for their own security is our ultimate exit strategy and it seems we’ve wasted a good year in doing that.

What then needs to be done? First and foremost, we need to make sure our troops are getting everything they need to do their job effectively and safely, which includes double reinforced steel vehicles to protect our troops against road-side bombs, the weapon of choice by the insurgents. We need to enhance security so there is a safe environment for the Iraqi people to participate in the national elections by January. That means trying to work with Iraqi Security forces to take away the insurgent’s sanctuaries and diminish their capability. We need to step up our efforts in employing local Iraqis to rebuild their own country. There is a direct correlation between those areas with a high unemployment rate (70% in some places) and from where the insurgency is coming. We need to ask for more help from NATO and countries in the Arab League to provide training and equipment for a new Iraqi Security Force so we can begin to fade into the background and eventually bring our troops home.

Cutting and running is not an option. It would guarantee chaos, possible civil war, a sanctuary for international terrorism and a power vacuum that Iran would be more than happy to fill in the region. But our leaders in this country need to level with the American people. Our task in Iraq will not be easy. It has already become more difficult. More international support would alleviate the high cost we are now paying in both lives and money as well as add legitimacy to what we are trying to accomplish with the Iraqi people. It is not a lost cause, yet. But our window of opportunity is closing rapidly.